



The Invention Factory: Thomas Edison's Laboratories

The cluster of red brick buildings still stands. Asphalt driveways cover most of the space separating the buildings. A chain link fence topped with barbed wire surrounds the complex. Today, this group of buildings looks little different from the hundreds of abandoned factory sites that dot the



(Edison National Historic Site)

landscape in the industrial towns of New Jersey and other parts of the Northeast. When it was in operation, however, this complex was one of the most important, if little known, creations of Thomas Alva Edison. These buildings--the chemistry, physics, and metallurgy laboratories; machine shop; pattern shop; research library; and rooms for experiments—were built in 1887. They formed the core of Edison's research and development complex, which he claimed contained everything necessary to invent "useful things every man, woman, and child in the world wants...at a price they could afford to pay."

(Matthew Josephson, *Edison: A Biography* [New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., [1959] 1992, 314.).

It was here in this West Orange, New Jersey, complex that Edison systematically developed his ideas for alkaline storage batteries, recorded music, and motion pictures, and transformed them into marketable products. Once perfected, these prototypes were sent to the vast factory complex Edison began building in 1888 adjacent to the laboratory. Here they were produced in commercial quantities and then sold throughout the world. The products developed at the research laboratory during the late 19th and early 20th centuries dramatically changed the way Americans lived and worked. The fusion of business and technology achieved at the West Orange complex provided a model for modern corporate and governmental research and development laboratories.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

[About This Lesson](#)

RELATED INFORMATION

[How to Use a TwHP Lesson](#)

Getting Started: Inquiry Question

Setting the Stage: Historical Context

Locating the Site: Maps

1. West Orange, N.J.
2. Edison's laboratory complex, 1887
3. Edison's laboratory complex, c. 1914

Determining the Facts: Readings

1. The Creation of the Research and Development Laboratory
2. Edison and Popular Culture

Visual Evidence: Images

1. Edison and batteries
2. The laboratory complex
3. The chemistry laboratory
4. Edison's library
5. Edison and the phonograph
6. Phonograph/kinetoscope parlor, 1895

Putting It All Together: Activities

1. Researching the Impact of Edison's Inventions
2. The Invention Process
3. Researching the Local Community

Supplementary Resources

Lessons on Related Topics

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About the National Register

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